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City cites environmental issues, may create tent city

The Associated Press

KEY WEST, Fla. -- Hidden in the mangrove trees, about 100 yards from the beaches where tourists sun themselves, homeless Vietnam veteran Dave Stir sits at the camp where he has lived for two years, barefoot and surrounded by empty beer cans.

"I really try not to hurt anybody or anything," said the graying 52-year-old, one of dozens of homeless men who call the spot home, sleeping in small tents and keeping their food in plastic crates balanced in mangrove branches.

But city officials say the squatters at this camp and others scattered across Key West must go because they're damaging the protected and environmentally sensitive mangrove wetlands.

"It looks like it's not too bad," assistant city manager John Jones said of the area on a recent visit. "But it's in endangered wetlands. They're violating the law."

Police are set to evict camp occupants this week as the city begins enforcing an ordinance that prohibits trespassing in endangered wetlands. More than a dozen of about 40 camps have disappeared since the city posted no-trespassing signs last month.

Along with the environmental concerns, there may be another issue.

Such sweeps of the homeless are growing increasingly common in cities that rely on tourism, said Donald Whitehead, executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless. "Homeless people are viewed as anti-tourist. They (city officials) don't want their city to have a bad impression."

There are few places for the estimated 800 homeless to go on Key West, a 2-mile-by-4-mile island that has no emergency shelters. Transients are drawn to the city by the balmy winter weather and thousands of tourists ripe for panhandling.

City officials have tried to keep the city clean and tourist-friendly while respecting the civil rights of the homeless. They succeeded in making the downtown tourist center a no-panhandling zone, but failed with other efforts, including busing transients to Miami.

The latest proposal would create a tent city called a "safe zone" on Stock Island, about 112 miles from downtown, behind the jail and near a landfill dubbed Mount Trashmore. The Monroe County Commission is scheduled to consider the plan March 17.

The safe zone would have shelters, a trailer with showers and a laundry. The city would provide free bus transportation to downtown and to the local soup kitchen.

It would house about 120 people, but Jones said he doesn't expect that many will use it, in part because alcohol and drugs would be prohibited and because the location is inconvenient.

"This is the only area right now that everybody agrees to put them, except the people that we're going to be putting there," Jones said.

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In a recent tour of homeless camps, several homeless veterans asked Jones where they should go after they're evicted.

Jones couldn't tell them where to move. But he did say that if they move onto public property, no one could tell them to leave without providing another place for them to go.

Stir, who said he has cirrhosis, said he wouldn't go to the safe zone but might try to get admitted at the VA hospital.

As Jones prepared to walk away, Stir mentioned another option: "You see that rope above my tent? I'll be on the end of that."

"Us poor veterans are less important than the mangrove trees," Stir lamented.

On the Net: Key West: <http://www.keywestcity.com>

National Coalition for the Homeless: <http://www.nationalhomeless.org>

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